

Improvement after Inspection

Dr Jane Perryman

Institute of Education
University of London
20 Bedford Way
London WC1H 0AL
UK

j.perryman@ioe.ac.uk

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Abstract

This paper is based on a case study of one English secondary school in the three years following its release from Special Measures. Having followed the school's successful improvement (in inspection terms) whilst under Special Measures, I was interested to know if the school would be able to sustain its improvement once the inspectors had departed. Data used is from interviews with middle and senior management detailing responses to the essential question 'is the school improving?' I found that although in many respects the school was maintaining its improvement, some middle and senior managers were suspicious about the long-term effects of becoming an institution so seemingly built around passing inspection.

Keywords

School Effectiveness

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In a previous paper (Perryman, 2002), I researched a school under the intensive inspection regime of Special Measures. I concluded that teachers and governors live in fear of going into Special Measures and it is seen as something that needs to be survived. This has the consequence of schools struggling to come out of Special Measures and making changes that can be short-term and cosmetic. Documentation is manipulated, perfect lessons devised, displays created, meeting records augmented, and briefings rehearsed. Teachers conspire to unite against an external enemy. The school is presented in its best light, as the inspection system invites a fabricated performance (Ball, 2003) rather than an honest appraisal. Because of the fact that the inspection is of performance and not of reality, schools do not get the intervention and support they really need.

Whilst under Special Measures, teachers at Northgate, the case study school, learned to perform according to the norms dictated by the inspection regime. Because of the intensity of the inspections there was a real sense of constant surveillance, and as teachers learned to behave as if they were being inspected all the time, they learned to perform what they came to call 'the game' with efficiency, and consequently Northgate was removed from Special Measures. I hoped that the improvement was permanent at Northgate, and that its rapid recovery could be sustained but wondered if schools released from an intense inspection regime suffer an inevitable decline.

This paper focuses on teachers' views on the nature of sustained progress at Northgate. Researching the school during the aftermath of Special Measures and its subsequent OfSTED inspection, I found that although in many respects the school was maintaining its improvement, some middle and senior managers were

suspicious about the long-term effects of becoming an institution so seemingly built around passing inspection. I was interested to know what effect the departure of the inspectors would have on the continuing improvement of the school. When Special Measures was not there to engender a programme of externally monitored change, would the school maintain its improvement? I examined whether the school did improve, in its own and in OfSTED's terms, over the time of my research, exploring whether improvement was advanced or retarded, and what the effects were on the school in the long-term. Given that it can be argued that inspection is more often about a performance (Ball, 1997; 2001; Goffman, 1959; Lonsdale & Parsons, 1998; Mahony & Hextall, 2001; Plowright, 2007) and can ignore the real developmental needs of a school, then how real is improvement after inspection?

Inspection and School Improvement

Inspection is a part of the increased accountability culture in English schools (Chitty, 2004; Gleeson & Husbands, 2001; Neave, 1988; Poulson, 1998; Power, 1994; Tomlinson, 2001). There has been a shift in accountability in teaching since the 1988 Education Reform Act, from teacher professionalism, with accountability to themselves, their colleagues and their students (self-regulation), to accountability to external agencies such as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), OfSTED and the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA). Inspection became a part of this increased accountability when the Education Act of 1992 led to the creation of OfSTED (Office for Standards in Education), which is a privatised inspection system. Inspection teams, who have to bid for contracts, are led by a Registered Inspector, and inspect schools according to a criteria-based system. The framework for inspections is revised frequently, with the most recent in 2009, emphasising the importance of school self-evaluation, and cutting the notice-period that schools are given before an inspection takes place.

The inspection framework relevant to this paper is from 2003. Under this system schools were inspected every six years, with inspectors in school for a week during which time they observe lessons, interview staff and pupils and analyse documentation in order to evaluate standards achieved; pupils' attitudes, values and personal development; teaching and learning; the quality of the curriculum; the care, guidance and support of pupils; partnerships with parents, other schools and the community; leadership and management. The results of the inspection were made available in a public document and published on OfSTED's website. Just as under the new framework, if a school was not seen to be providing an acceptable standard of education the school could become subject to Special Measures and subsequently receive termly visits from Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) to monitor progress until the school was removed from Special Measures following a full inspection, if deemed to have made sufficient improvements. In extreme cases, if OfSTED did not observe improvement, the school would be closed down. Because of this fear of closure, schools undergo an intense period of preparation for inspections as OfSTED, and particularly Special Measures, form an important part of the disciplinary regime in education. 'The exercise of school inspection (is) one of improvement through threat and fear, an intentionally disciplining role' (Lonsdale & Parsons, 1998: 110).

School Improvement

The issue of school improvement is not uncontentious. Reynolds (2001) argues that the mid 1980s was the first time school improvement was linked to school effectiveness and since then 'researchers and practitioners [have been] struggling to relate their strategies and their research knowledge to the realities of schools in a pragmatic, systematic and sensitive way' (Reynolds, 2001: 33). This is a benign view of school improvement, which sees the impetus for improvement as coming from within the school, appropriate to its needs.

However, the OfSTED slogan ‘improvement through inspection’ (in 2007 revised to the more grandiose ‘raising standards improving lives’) is controversial, largely because of its one-size fits-all approach, which de contextualises schools from socio-economic circumstances. According to Morley and Rassool (1999: 80), the standardisation of the National Curriculum, the OfSTED inspection criteria and the publication of national league tables have all contributed to the ‘emergence of a nationally uniform systems approach to school improvement guided by the development, largely, of technical expertise grounded in market based rationalities’. This has led to school improvement becoming inextricably linked with the school effectiveness framework. School improvement is increasingly defined in benchmarking terms, and for schools in challenging circumstances this is an immediate disadvantage. As Morley and Rassool (1999: 89) remark ‘in the crusade for quality and effectiveness, performance data play an important role in identifying the winners and losers’. The close relationship between socio-economic circumstances and attainment is largely ignored. In this paper, when I discuss the improvement of Northgate, I will be looking at how the school improved in OfSTED terms, and how its capacity for internal improvement was affected.

According to Matthews and Sammons (2005: 162), at the end of 2003-4 there were 332 schools under Special Measures (or 1.5% of the total), including 94 Secondary Schools (2.8%). They also found that over the years 1993-2004, the number of schools across all categories which were removed from Special Measures was 1231 (84%) as opposed to 220 (16%) which were closed. The respective figures for secondary schools are 186 (76%) removed and 57 (24%) closed. This trend continued as according to OfSTED (2007: 17) ‘of the 242 schools subject to special measures at the end of 2004-5, 226 schools (93%) were making the expected progress towards coming out of the category within the two year monitoring period’. Thus Matthews and Sammons (2005: 172) conclude that:

There is overwhelming evidence from inspection and also trends in national assessment and examination results that most schools improve markedly following a period of being subject to Special Measures and that the improvement is sustained in the majority of cases.

I would argue that these figures are unsurprising. Being under Special Measures is a demoralising and disempowering experience for those in schools, and since it is made transparent what teachers and management have to do in order to be removed from Special Measures, it is hardly surprising that when they are able, schools adopt the discourse, practice and policy to enable themselves to demonstrate 'improvement'. If an outside body, acting both as judge and jury, finds fault and sets out a clearly defined recipe for rectifying that fault, it would be foolish not to follow the recipe. But in following this recipe, what does a school neglect which is important to its own unique institution? One could take issue with Matthews and Sammons' phrase 'most schools improve markedly', since all that the schools are doing is reaching a standard which entitles them to be removed from Special Measures. Unsurprisingly, Nicholaïdou (2005: 73) argues that 'whilst the schools may come out of Special Measures we cannot give any informed judgement as to the potential for longer-term growth'. When there is a tenuous ownership of the process of change, the release from Special Measures is bound to have consequences. As Plowright (2007:373), discussing his research of a school undergoing an OfSTED inspection concludes' the preparations, based on the self evaluation activities were aimed at satisfying the OfSTED inspectors and the accountability agenda, rather than at school improvement in real terms...the self evaluation process aimed at improvement, then appears to consist of meeting the short-term requirements of the OfSTED inspection process rather than any of the more substantial development needs of the school'.

Sustained improvement is, anyway, a contentious term. Gray (Wilcox & Gray, 1996: 25) found that schools did not change effectiveness much year on year. This, he writes:

injects a sense of realism into school efforts to improve over time. After a period of movement, schools seemed to plateau. Three years of year-on-year improvement represented a 'good run' for a school, four years an exceptional one.

The idea that schools can improve year after year into infinity seems highly unrealistic. I am reminded of the constant year-on-year improvement in GCSE and A level results nationally. This is not seen as a natural consequence of the search for improvement, but viewed suspiciously. How do exam results keep going up? Are the exams easier? However, some evidence suggests that schools which have been in Special Measures acquire or develop a greater capacity to improve and to sustain improvement than schools whose performance is of relatively lesser concern (Matthews & Sammons, 2005: 160). Matthews and Sammons argue that there is no doubt that most schools improve markedly following a period of being subject to Special Measures. They argue that:

indeed, some develop innovative and successful practice, which puts them at the leading edge within their LEAs. All special measures schools have another section 10 inspection within two years of being removed from special measures. Only a small proportion of schools (below 2%) that emerge from this category have deteriorated subsequently. By July 2003, 15 schools had been made subject to special measures for a second time.

But according to Harris and Chapman (2004):

the evidence also shows that such schools have to exceed ‘normal’ efforts to secure this improvement and that gains in performance are normally followed by periods of flat performance...in summary, success can be short-lived and fragile in schools in difficult and challenging circumstances.

Ouston and Davies (1998) researched 55 schools which had been inspected between 1993 and 1996 to explore secondary schools’ responses to inspection. They asked schools if OfSTED slowed down or speeded up change, and their results were inconclusive:

Many schools reported slowing down while they recovered from the ‘ordeal’ of inspection – the ‘post-inspection’ blues. They then made a fresh start on implementing the key issues. However, some teachers expressed concern that inspection had slowed down progress on other issues. Questionnaire data suggest that development was slowed down in one third of schools and speeded up in another third, with the remaining third stating that it made no difference to the pace of change (Ouston & Davies, 1998: 19).

This is what will be explored within this paper: how genuine was the (OfSTED-identified) improvement experienced by Northgate and was it sustained over the long-term?

The Research Context

Northgate¹ is a mixed inner-city comprehensive for pupils aged 11-16. The pupils come from a four mile catchment area of significant economic and social deprivation. During its most recent inspection, there were 865 pupils on roll, 75% of whom were from minority ethnic groups. There were 37 languages spoken at the school, and 10% of the pupils were at the early stages of English acquisition. 30% of pupils had Special Educational Needs, 50% of the pupils receive free school meals², and there were around fifty refugees³. I chose Northgate as having failed an OfSTED inspection it had been under Special Measures for eighteen months, during which time it was monitored by frequent inspections by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI). It was released from Special Measures, then underwent another OfSTED inspection almost two years later. The research in this paper focuses on the aftermath of the subsequent OfSTED inspection.

In order to further protect the anonymity of the school, the actual dates of the relevant research periods are withheld. However, in order to prevent confusion, I refer to the three academic years of research as Years 4, 5 and 6, recognising that my research took place from the fourth year of the school's opening. There were five distinct periods of research: just over a year after the school came out of Special Measures, (summer, year 4); a term later (autumn, year 5); in the subsequent spring in the weeks leading to the school's next OfSTED inspection (spring, year 5); the summer following this OfSTED inspection (summer year 5); and a year on from the OfSTED inspection (spring year 6). The key methods used were interviews with middle and senior managers, observation and participation in an inspection week.

¹ This is a pseudonym to protect the school

² A benchmark for measurement of poverty

³ All statistics from the OfSTED report, date withheld

Schools released from Special Measures must undergo a full OfSTED inspection within two years of their release and the school was reinspected in Spring Year 5. I have detailed the experience of the school in the time leading up to this inspection elsewhere (Perryman, 2007) but essentially the head teacher and management had continued the regime experienced under inspection and replaced external disciplinary sources with internal mechanisms. The OfSTED visit in spring year 5 was designed to confirm that the correct decision had been made in terms of removing the school from Special Measures. According to OfSTED (2007: 18), this was not unusual:

Schools are inspected again around two years after the removal of special measures. The results of these inspections are impressive: 60% have been judged to be 'good', not simply unsatisfactory'. During the 2005/06 school year, 11 schools previously in special measures were judged to be 'outstanding'. This shows that the improvements that schools need to make to be removed from special measures are not simply a 'quick fix' but are sustained

However, I would argue that sustained improvement can only be judged once the threat of imminent inspection has been removed. Having successfully passed this inspection, the school, under the 2003 Inspection framework, could now confidently anticipate at least three years without any inspection⁴. Accordingly, I revisited the school in the summer of that year to see how the new-found freedom from inspection was affecting the school, and in the following spring (year 6), to investigate '*sustained improvement*'.

⁴ Of course the 2005 and 2009 frameworks changed the notice period and predictability of the timing of the inspection.

Positive Change

When I returned in summer of year 5, I found a great deal of optimism. Some middle and senior managers really felt positive about the future, and credited OfSTED for providing the impetus. For Bob, the sense of hope was because the school carried the label of a successful school, making prospective candidates want to work there. This is an important factor as a school staffed with subject specialists is clearly going to be perceived as providing a better standard of education than one with supply teachers.

Well my view is of course it was all worth it, it gives a young school and a fragile school a seal of approval which indicates that things are going definitely in the right way (Bob, senior manager, summer year 5).

Similarly, when Simon talks of the school being ‘marketable’, he is talking about parents in the local area actually choosing the school:

It's a specialist school backed up by a very good OfSTED, then we go on to become an even better school. Consolidate on that and I think its going to become a very marketable school (Simon, senior manager, summer year 5).

On being released from Special Measures, the school had also been able to apply for specialist status, which Bob also saw as a selling point for the school.

It's about capitalising on what specialist school status, specialist school funding enables us to achieve and I think we are looking now for, within the school, we are looking for dynamism. We are looking for a willingness to experiment, to take risks (Bob, senior manager, summer year 5).

Susan welcomed the support given to school self-evaluation, implying that without the pressure from OfSTED the school would not have been able to move on:

It pays to have an honest opinion of yourself, honest in that your expectations need to be pitched at the right level, and OfSTED do give you that kick to move (Susan, senior manager, spring year 6).

This is interesting, as Susan implied that in providing an impetus for change, OfSTED drives a school forward, and makes the staff, and particularly management of the school, really focus on the issues that matter for the school. Susan also talked of teaching lessons ‘this particular way’, and in some areas of practice in the school the OfSTED model was still being maintained. Some of the lessons had been learned, notably in teaching and learning. This is unsurprising, as if teachers had been teaching to a particular model, successfully, they were unlikely to change. In spring year 6, Bob outlined how he thought the constant preparation for inspection inculcated a vision of a ‘good lesson’, according to the OfSTED recipe:

People who come to the school get immersed in what a good lesson is. You can go up to [names some subjects and some teachers] and they will tell you what a good lesson is. Although we were doing it to get out of Special Measures, we were also doing it for a very clear other agenda which is to improve teaching in this school because we know when we improve teaching that six months later the learning improves (Bob, senior manager, spring year 6).

Here Bob is directly linking a ‘good’ lesson as defined by OfSTED with self-evident improvements in teaching and learning. The wide acceptance of the three part lesson

is partially because it is so easy to check and monitor. Judging some aspects of teaching (for example, pupil engagement) are highly subjective and very difficult to prove. Whether or not a lesson has three parts, however, is an objective fact. Adherence to this indicates adherence to accepted understandings of what makes a good lesson.

Donna and Simon put the perceived improvement in teaching and learning down to constant OfSTED inspections as the need to do detailed plans meant people had started to produce them automatically:

I think the outcome of having all those inspections is that, I would say, I would think that the standard of teaching in classrooms is more 'good'. I think it is because people are following the OfSTED model and people are just into doing good practice and they know the format of a lesson plan, even though now you don't probably have to write out your lesson plans, in your head people are kind of doing what, you know, what they need to do. I know in my department, that people take their planning seriously, you know, it's not just dashed off, 'oh God I haven't planned my lesson for today', people have planned, and there are more meetings about it, and there is a focus about where we are going (Donna, middle manager, spring year 6).

So OfSTED did appear to be the driving force behind improvements in teaching and learning, but only if the OfSTED criteria were used to judge the success. Lessons become 'good' by following the OfSTED recipe for what is good. The acceptance of the OfSTED discourse meant that that is how good teaching at Northgate came to be judged. Thus the outcome of Special Measures was that there was an acceptance of the discourse of effectiveness. Some interviewees credited OfSTED directly with bringing about the improvement.

It imposed an improvement agenda on the school (Bob, senior manager, spring year 6).

I think when you look back and you sort of analyse the school, there are things we do wrong, but a lot of the things we do right. They have been driven by the Special Measures and the fact that we have been accountable, and I think that you know a lot of the good practice that goes on in the school has been driven by that. I think it has had a direct impact on it (Simon, senior manager, spring year 6).

In using terms such as ‘imposed’ and ‘driven’, these Northgate senior managers acknowledge the way in which the external pressure applied by OfSTED was a force for change. Similarly a senior manager told Stoll and Fink (1996: 71) ‘I do not think that the school would be in the position that it is now without the pressure of OfSTED behind them’.

However, if teaching was still following the OfSTED model, middle managers were concerned that many of the other systems set up had been allowed to dwindle, particularly with respect to behaviour:

A combination of things really, there seems to be no follow-through with sanctions, so that's a problem. The standard of behaviour is going down, there has been less and less follow-through from upstairs, then it's always going to make a difference. The kids are getting wilder. It's never going to be an easy school to work in, the kids need to know the boundaries and they need to know that if anything happens there is a consequence, but at the moment there is no consequence for anything (Dave, middle manager, summer year 5).

Another teacher had a year 9 class, 30 in the room, bottom set, all the nutters of the world in this lesson, rioting, so I just went into the lesson and pulled a couple of kids out and bought them over here because there's nowhere else to go (Lola, middle manager, summer year 5).

Both the above quotations express concerns that systems set up in the school were not being backed up by senior management. This was linked with the view that management were not as visible as they had been, as Dave complains:

The headteacher hasn't been as visible a presence around the school and kids are just out of control to be honest (Dave, middle manager, summer year 5).

The effects of this from a behaviour point of view were described as follows by Lynn who, turning to the system that had existed in the school when it was being inspected, found that the expected support was not there:

I had a student in a lesson, wouldn't let them go to the toilet, they kicked the desk over, kicked chairs around, and I ended up saying 'have you finished your petulant fit?', swore at me and I was like, right, we've got no on-call, no referral and I said 'out' and I ended up going to the head of department and saying 'd'you want to take him?' he said 'I can't at the moment', so we just left the kid in the corridor... there's a lot more of the kids have got the message that nothing happens (Lynn middle manager, summer year 5).

In a previous paper (Perryman, 2005), I argued that the deterioration of management systems was an inevitable by-product of management having to jump through external hoops leaving them lacking the systems, will and impetus to manage

effectively once the external disciplinary mechanisms were gone. Zoë explained how she thought that teachers and management needed an external disciplinary mechanism which backed management up:

I would say, I think that for some people if you look at personalities, individuals in the school, some people need to be inspected like every year; they need someone to come in and check on what they are doing so that they keep doing it, because I think it's human nature to be lazy and to not do your job. For some people it leads to people improving because they have to suddenly do their job but I don't think as a whole school it ever improves a whole school. I don't think it ever changes a school's direction much. I don't think if you were a really rubbish school that they are ever going to come in and stop you being a really rubbish school because it's political (Zoë, middle manager, spring year 6).

Zoë, interestingly, is not blaming the management team, but the teachers who are 'lazy', and she welcomes the self-discipline engendered by inspection. In her view the external pressure ensures that everybody does their job properly, from the monitoring and supervision function of senior management, to teachers simply 'do[ing] their job'.

So, overall, whilst the school could be commended on continuing the improvement in teaching and learning, there were concerns from staff about a deterioration in some of the systems, with staff and management no longer working together to ensure the successful running of the school's management systems. There seemed to be two reasons for this; a dip in the school's performance in the period immediately following the inspections, and a sense of complacency following the final successful OfSTED report.

Deterioration

Many thought the lack of impetus was because of the sheer effort needed to pass OfSTED, which had left behind a staff too exhausted to maintain its own high standards:

I think people have let go. I think everyone has done that, including myself to a certain extent. I am trying to hold on to doing certain things around school still, but I think people have disappeared a bit (Dave, middle manager, summer year 5).

But then the fall out from OfSTED is that everybody feels that they worked really hard and OfSTED was the kind of thing that they worked for, and it's really hard to get people to go back up again, because everybody gave a hundred per cent and is completely worn out and then the impact of that is lots of staff disaffection. If you like, it's almost like the year finished when OfSTED went (Janice, middle manager, summer year 5).

Steve and Simon worried that this had adversely affected SATs results (and thus would affect the GCSE results);

I think we have got some payback now, the SATs results are down in maths and science and people are very, very tired. I think we are still feeling the effects of it and it's still kicking in and I think it is mainly because of what was neglected during preparing for OfSTED (Simon, senior manager, summer year 5).

There's been an inevitable dip, yes, and that has been reflected in attainment and there are issues, I think, will be reflected in, certainly it appears to be reflected in some of the key stage 3 tests results in that they are disappointing for us at first reading (Steve, senior manager, summer year 5).

This is not an unusual side-effect of inspection. Cullingford and Daniels (1999) modelled changes to 426 schools' GCSE performances over the four years in which they were inspected. They concluded that in the years they were inspected, a school's GCSE results would improve less than in the years they were not. Using multi-level modelling, Shaw, Newton, Aitken and Darnell (2003), analysed the effects of inspection on GCSE results with a much larger sample over the first complete OfSTED cycle from 1992-1997. The largest part of the sample was county, mixed comprehensive schools, 1933 in all. They found 'inspection had a consistent, negative effect on achievement, depressing it by about one half of a per cent. This effect persisted during the period studied' (Shaw et al., 2003: 68).

There was a notably regular use of the word 'dip', indicating how some interviewees saw this lethargy as a temporary decline in performance:

I think, yes, there has been inevitably a dip, and I think it is the correct adverb, it is inevitable. The leadership team, heads of faculty, heads of year, classroom teachers, support staff can't work at that level, at that pressure, at that intensity 365 days a year or everyday the school's in session. (Bob, senior manager, summer year 5).

I think that people did take their foot off the pedal and things did slide a bit because OfSTED was in the middle of the term, so it broke that term into two, so there was a bit of laxness and a bit of laziness and almost a slight drop in

the rate of activity, which was to do with OfSTED being over and people's resources being focused on OfSTED (Steve, senior manager, summer year 5).

There were even effects such as a large amount of staff absence (some no doubt genuine as a result of stress as I have detailed in a previous paper (Perryman, 2007), some because staff felt, after many twelve-hour days that they were owed a break), and a knock-on effect on pupil behaviour.

You can't do it all at once. You spend half the time recovering, you do, you just sink. You're absolutely shattered, you know, and the staff can't do anything, you can't ask them to do anything (Susan, senior manager, summer year 5).

Straight after OfSTED, there was a bit of relief that it had finished. There was quite a lot of 'we've got through it now, so we can relax', and things went off the boil for a bit. People were just like 'oh I can't be bothered', because they've had so much stress coming up to OfSTED and put so much work in and just felt kind of like brain-dead for a long time after. I think things did slip a bit. (Mel, middle manager, summer year 5).

For some there was a sense that, in some respects, the school had started to believe in its own hype, that having been pronounced as successful by OfSTED, no further work or development was needed. This is interesting, as having fought to escape the label of Special Measures the staff seemed happy to sit on their laurels and bask in the more positive label of 'improving school':

I think that is the complacency. It's that sort of 'yes we are a good school, we do this, we do that, we do the other'. It seems to me they only work on behaviour when it is a crisis point and they only work on academic stuff when it's something that is going to directly impact on data results. It's just like an ostrich burying its head in the sand that there's actually a problem boiling in the school and people are not owning it or doing anything about it (Mel, middle manager, spring year 6).

Mel indicates that issues were only dealt with if a crisis arose, or if external pressure was applied. This pressure is usually applied by OfSTED.

This sense of a dip in performance, and complacency led some to wonder how genuine the improvement was:

It depends what you mean by 'it has improved' that's what I've got the biggest question mark over. It is the same school as it was before OfSTED came. It is still a hard task to get thirty kids of extreme different abilities and language differences in a room sat down and learning, really learning and it was a hard school to do that in before OfSTED and it is a hard school to do post-OfSTED. So when people go 'it's an improving school' I have a big question mark. I accept that it's the same school as it was. I think it would have improved much more if we'd had less OfSTED, less inspection and find other ways to motivate staff. So I don't buy the idea that OfSTED made it an improving school. (Zoe, middle manager, summer year 6).

This concurs with Plowright (2007) one of whose respondents reported 'This is my [nth] inspection and each time...they paper over the cracks and it looks fantastic in the report. Whereas you only have to go a little deeper and there are real problems'.

Zoe makes the point that teaching in a school facing challenging circumstances is always difficult, and constant OfSTED inspections can hinder the efforts of a school to develop. Further, passing OfSTED can lead to a false sense of security. Thus, because the positive OfSTED report bought with it demand for places in the school from local parents, and a full complement of specialist staff, any problems could be ignored. There was a sense that the reality of working in a school not without problems hits home after a successful OfSTED, linked with the fact that OfSTED inspections focus on a performance not a reality, as discussed in a previous paper (Perryman, 2006).

People have got to realise the kind of school they are working in here and front up a bit more and stop moaning and start getting stuck in. I think it has gone off a bit since OfSTED. (Matt, middle manager, summer year 5).

Matt's call for everybody to play a part agrees with Zoë's earlier, not blaming senior management solely, but missing the discipline engendered by inspection, which meant that everybody was doing their job, pulling together, and working towards a common aim.

Conclusion

Whether or not the middle and senior managers thought that the school had genuinely improved, the OfSTED report of year 5 concluded that:

[Northgate] is an effective and rapidly improving school that provides a good quality of education and good value-for-money. The headteacher is a very well supported by the governors and senior leadership group and provides

outstanding leadership that is raising the aspirations and expectations of staff and pupils. Despite operating in extremely challenging circumstances, overall good quality of teaching and learning ensures that pupils achieve well.

There seems little doubt that, according to the criteria laid down and then judged by OfSTED, in the short-term Northgate had sustained its improvement following its release from Special Measures. The middle and senior managers at the school generally concurred that the school was a better place to work, behaviour had improved, teaching was easier and leadership was dynamic. There is evidence to suggest that the inculcation of the OfSTED model during Special Measures had led to a management and staff skilled in making successful improvements which would meet with inspectors' approval, particularly in terms of teaching lessons in the accepted OfSTED style. Improvements do seem to have been genuine, as evidenced by the views of the middle and senior managers, and Northgate's recovery had been sustained. If school improvement is to be judged by the criteria laid down by OfSTED, then the process of inspection and Special Measures had secured Northgate's improvement. By all the relevant bench-marking criteria, examination results, pupil recruitment and community esteem the school had improved.

However, I would question Northgate's ability to improve according to its own specific development needs. In the medium-term the sheer effort made to 'pass' OfSTED and the resultant sense of exhaustion and complacency leads to the conclusion that improvement was hard to sustain. More crucially, as so much of Northgate's efforts were put into 'performing the good school', suppressing many of its genuine problems and development needs, 'sustained improvement' was difficult.

Eileen explains the problem with suppressing the genuine issues faced by the school;

Because OfSTED is only inspecting the performance and not the reality then it can't actually help with improvement, because you are too afraid to say 'come and see us and tell us what we should do' because they're not going to come and tell you what you can do, they are going to come and close you down and put you into Special Measures (Eileen, senior manager, spring year 6).

This fear of going into Special Measures haunts the staff of schools in challenging circumstances, and as Eileen suggests, encourages self-evaluation that is designed to obscure, rather than illuminate. She thinks that developmental self-evaluation would be much more useful.

I think the method is wrong. The point I am making is this - we should be working towards proper self-evaluation. I think that is the logic and it is far easier on the nerves, and it's a far better practice because it is embedded, it actually then becomes embedded. You should be able to evaluate your work and change it, and the parents should and the children should have the same process and I think OfSTED really is a diversion because you get all hyped up. So it has got to involve some degree of stringent self-evaluation. I don't just mean me changing the odd thing, but me being held up to account and them saying, 'have you thought of this?' and evaluating my good practice and evaluating my bad practice (Eileen, senior manager, spring year 6).

Although the framework introduced in 2009 (OfSTED, 2008) places greater emphasis on school self evaluation, the essential premise remains the same. The proposals for 2009 claimed 'Self-evaluation is important; a school that does not know its own strengths and weaknesses is unlikely to be able to put in place well targeted plans,

which lead to improvement'. Thus self-evaluation is there to provide evidence for inspections, not as Plowright (2007: 390) hopes 'the converse will be expected: that it will be inspection that will make an important contribution to self evaluation'.

Eileen goes on to express what many feel was the problem with this model of inspection, that it is a short-term improvement measure.

It doesn't serve us in terms of improving schools. It actually doesn't serve that function. It's supposed to improve schools and it actually doesn't. It does improve them for a short period of time, but not in the long-term, because then we get back to dealing with things in the way we always did deal with things, and that really whatever system people put in place for inspection they should deal with schools as they really are, warts-and-all, whatever that means, and be understanding of that and still get the best possible practice out of it (Eileen, senior manager, spring year 6).

The lack of ability to move on, to move on to 'the next stage', is because of the paralysis caused by the regime of external accountability. If the members of an institution are forced into normalisation by a punishing regime, once they are normalised they can lack the will or initiative to make their own changes which deviate from the prescribed routine, even when given permission. A school in challenging circumstances at the start of inspection remains in challenging circumstances at the end of it, needing support, not censure.

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